

Descriptive Piece: 'Drunken Kelly'

A descriptive piece can be termed succinctly as 'storytelling through music'. In Irish traditional music, the best known example of this type is the 'Fox Chase'. It was played in Ireland as early as the 18th century¹. For this particular piece, the uilleann pipes portray the story of the chase by imitating the barks of hounds, the trumpets of the hunters and the howls of the fox.

In the Counties of Leitrim and Longford there is a rich fiddle tradition of which a large number of music manuscripts dating back as far as the mid-nineteenth century have survived. Among these manuscripts are a number of descriptive pieces, which include: 'The Hare in the Corn' (a similar theme to the 'Fox Chase'); 'The Old Man Rocking the Cradle' and 'Drunken Kelly'. In all of these, *scordatura*, or 'cross-tuning' as it also referred to, is employed by the fiddle player to create the necessary imitations required by the pieces². The main focus of this article is 'Drunken Kelly'.

'Drunken Kelly', also known as 'The Drunken Man's Freaks', appears in numerous local manuscripts under various names and settings. The piece conveys the story of how a drunken man on being thrown out of his local tavern attempts to regain entry using a variety of strategies. Fortunately, in one of these manuscripts, in the handwriting of the fiddle player Hughie Reilly, the significance of each of the sections of the piece is written in. Using this information, and having in his youth heard the piece played and explained by Hughie's brother, Michael Reilly (1920-1967), Fr. John Quinn (b.1940) P.P. of Gortletteragh, Co. Leitrim summarises the tale: "When the story starts Drunken Kelly is inside the tavern.....He approaches the counter and knocks three times on the counter demanding more drink, which he is given; but immediately he starts to sing drunkenly and is put out into the cold, where he can sing, scold and shiver for all he is worth and go away without being let back in"³.

To perform this piece the fiddle has to be tuned to GDGB, which forms a G major chord. This *scordatura* tuning facilitates the *pizzicato* used for the knocking effect in the second strain. For the shivering effect in a later strain, short repetitive bows in quick successive are required to simulate the drunkard's deteriorating state. As the story progresses it is usual for the fiddler to provide the commentary and act out the various incidents that occur.

The tune appears to have been founded, but with some development, on the Scottish piece "Drunk at Night and Dry in the Morning", which is played with the same *scordatura*, but a tone higher, AEAC#⁴. The local manuscripts of County Leitrim and Longford are the only sources located thus far that include the storyline, which may indicate that its descriptive element was developed in this region. The following transcription is a critical edition which Fr. Quinn derived from those

¹ Although its composition has often been credited to the blind piper, Edmund Keating Hyland (1780-1845) of Cahir, Co. Tipperary, there is evidence that the air 'Maidrín Ruadh' on which it is founded was in circulation before Hyland's era. cf: Fintan Deere, 'Unsung Tipperary Musicians', *Treoir*, Vol. 20 No. 1, (1988), page 6

² For further reading on the relatively rich prevalence of *scordatura* in the local fiddle manuscripts of Counties Leitrim and Longford refer to: Conor Ward, 'Scordatura in Irish Traditional Fiddle Music in Longford and South Leitrim', *The Musicology Review*, Issue 8, (Dublin, 2013), pages 115-118

³ Fr. John Quinn, 'Drunken Man's Freaks', *Teathbha* 3, no. 3 (2008), pages 40-41.

⁴ Niel Gow and Sons, *Gow's Repository of the Dance Music of Scotland*, Book 3, (Edinburgh, 1799), page 77

manuscripts, specifically the Reilly family and Alex Sutherland manuscripts of Toom, Drumreilly, Co. Leitrim.

As described earlier, to play this piece the fiddle has to be re-tuned to GDGB (the 'A' string is tuned down one note to 'G' and the 'E' string is tuned down by a fourth to 'B'):

In the tavern drunken Kelly goes to the bar



He knocks and asks for more drink



He gets drink and sings



He is put out into the cold and scolds



He shivers



and has to go away



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